

## **China, Tibet and Pakistan's Bomb**

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The remarkable set of events involving the exposure of A. Q. Khan's nuclear black market and Libya's bidding farewell to its nuclear ambitions has also confirmed in stark fashion (Washington Post, February 15<sup>th</sup>) what the cognoscenti have known – that China provided Pakistan with a functioning design for a nuclear weapon and more. This was such a remarkable act of friendship to Pakistan, that it is instructive to ask why it came about.

The answer to that question comes via Tibet and its central role in the “protracted contest” between India and China (the title of the excellent chronicle by John Garver). Since its occupation by newly Communist China in 1950 Tibet has been a central term in the Sino-Indian equation. For China this was the reassertion of imperial suzerainty transmuted into the territorial control of its modern state over a minority. India viewed it through a different lens – the loss of a culturally contiguous area, independent for decades, to a distant culture. Strategically, it was the loss of a benign buffer and the demise of the state with which British India had negotiated a border. These contrasting positions have grounded the dynamics of the Sino-Indian relationship since then.

On the whole, India and the Tibetans have been on the losing end. For the first decade the Dalai Lama's administration was still based in Lhasa and had some autonomy and India still had a recognized voice in Tibetan affairs. This phase ended with the failed Tibetan uprising in 1959 and India's defeat at the hands of China in 1962. Overtly, not much has happened since to shake Chinese rule over Tibet. But this calm is misleading. Tibet remained seriously disaffected, a long ways from metropolitan China and the prospect of a revolt supported by India was never far from the minds of Chinese strategists. While Indian fecklessness was a stabilizing factor, the Chinese took no chances and in a classical move befriended Pakistan to present India with a two-front problem.

In the 1965 India-Pakistan war, there is evidence that Chinese threats brought the Indians to the negotiating table. However a mere six years later, Indian arms brought independence to Bangladesh in 1971 thus cutting Pakistan in half. In 1974 India exploded a nuclear device and thus (briefly) became the hegemonic power in the Indian subcontinent. These developments alarmed China. If India could liberate a disaffected population in East Pakistan, perhaps it could do so in Tibet as well. And an India unconstrained in the subcontinent would be much more likely to turn its eye outside its boundaries. Thus was set in motion the process of intense Chinese support for Pakistan's rearmament, leading to the supply of the nuclear weapon design and perhaps also the uranium needed for a couple of weapons in 1983.

This strategy was successful, helped also by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan which brought the United States into the region in implicit support of Pakistan. By 1984 when Mrs. Gandhi was assassinated, Pakistan was happily supporting the Punjab insurgency and in 1989 it was able to add the Kashmir insurgency to this roster – India was now back

on the defensive, within its own borders. In 1987 India did successfully demonstrate a greatly expanded capacity to operate along the Himalayas in the Sumdurong Chu incident but strategically it was too late.

What of the future? China's grip on Tibet seems more secure. A railroad currently being built will greatly expand its strategic heft in Tibet and will also amplify the prospects for demographically swamping Tibet. Also, unlike in the 1980s, China now wields twice as much economic power as India and will do so for the foreseeable future under current projections. These factors should make China less likely to arm Pakistan to the exclusion of other concerns. Pakistan in turn is under intense US pressure to assume a less roguish existence, which entails learning to coexist peacefully with India. India's Vajpayee, recognizing this opportunity, is attempting to craft an accommodation with Pakistan.

But these trends could reverse. It is hard to imagine that the Tibetans will quietly acquiesce in their fate forever – any liberalization or turmoil in China due to the political pressures that are building on the current regime will be their opportunity to express their discontent, with unpredictable consequences. For its part, Pakistan may find it impossible to continue its current path and seek an even closer military relationship with China to offset India's increasing economic and thence military advantage and perhaps even US pressure. The imperatives of the War on Terror suggest that the US and India should collaborate to tie Pakistan to India's increasing prosperity as a return for a retreat from strategic recklessness. On Tibet, an overdue recognition of its crucial role in the geopolitics of Asia would be fine beginning.